

WAR GAMES

Hurlburt Field volunteers spend some duty time coaching youngsters in chess

By DONNA HATCH
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MARY ESTHER — It's a centuries-old game that has been passed down through the generations. Now, students at Mary Esther Elementary School are learning to play chess, thanks to a cadre of men and women from Hurlburt Field.

The Mary Esther Elementary School Chess Club is the brainchild of Marine Corps Lt. Col. Charles Frawley, who said he is able to carry out his mission with the help of a group of dedicated volunteer coaches and the support of Kevin Dunleavy and Rocky Farry, both colonels at Hurlburt Field.

"I was given approval to ask for volunteers who would be able to spend some of their duty time, twice a month, to coach chess at the school," said Frawley, a Marine Corps liaison officer stationed at Hurlburt.

The coaching roster boasts 23 men and women —

military and civilian — who stop off on their way to work (many in uniform) to mentor the kids in the art of the game.

Each mentor must have a current security clearance or police records check, which is necessary in order to work on the campus.

The chess club, which is registered with the U.S. Chess Federation, meets "from 0730 to 0830, before school starts," in the school's cafeteria on the first and third Friday of the month. The group, which began meeting in October, is open to third-, fourth- and fifth-graders.

"We focus on rules and regs, basics of the game, offer a chess tip at the beginning of each session, and try to provide a positive role model, in terms of our professionalism," said Frawley, a former chess mentor at Plew Elementary School in Nicville.

"We also emphasize sportsmanship," Daphne Player, principal at Mary Esther Elementary, said the game is a tool for teaching other skills as well, "such as critical thinking, and can help build student self-esteem."

"At the school, we're very much an advocate of Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence," said Player, referring to the Harvard researcher who introduced the idea of different kinds of intelligences.

Player "enthusiastically" accepted Frawley's proposal to initiate a team at her school. "Gardner believed that that people are smart in at least eight ways, and one of those ways is visual/spatial,"

She said, "To understand chess you need to be able to visualize in your mind's eye what would happen next if you move this piece or that piece. If a child is strong in that area, the chess club gives that child an opportunity to shine."

The volunteer mentors teach the kids how to plan and execute an attack and how to reach an objective through logic and follow through.

In the game of chess, all of the player's forces are mobilized to gain an advantage of some sort over the oppo-

INSIDE

■ Chess is becoming hip among elementary school students/C2.



Above, Senior Master Sgt. Charles Hawkins demonstrates to Mary Esther Elementary School Chess Club members some of the strategic moves they can make during play. At left, Shannon Page contemplates her next move against her opponent, Senior Airman Dedrick Barnum, during a recent Friday morning game.

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From C1

nent, said Senior Master Sgt. Charles Hawkins, who coaches the kids.

"The ultimate objective: capture your opponent's king. It's all about learning strategy and tactic," said Hawkins, who once played collegiate level chess and uses the lessons learned in his current role in the military. "It's very similar, in theory, to what is experienced on the battlefield."

The war analogy is not lost on some of the young players. A third of the school's student body is from military families, said Player. Several kids in the group have parents who have been deployed to fight the war in Afghanistan.

Fourth-grader Incee Netinai said he enjoys the "way you have to think and the strategy" that goes into each game, "kind of like you do in war."

"We learn how to not let pieces open to attack and how to be ready for the next move," said Incee, who lives in Navarre. "I know how to play a real game now — and I'm beating people."

Jesse Horton, 10, of Fort Walton Beach, said he learned how to play at his grandmother's knee and joined the club to improve his skills.

"When I think about the

chessboard, I think about it like a big battlefield and try to find your enemies and winning the war," said the fourth-grader. "I'm getting better, too!"

Ten-year-old Mariah Turman said the Mary Esther Elementary School Chess is more than just learning to move chess piece on a board; it also teaches people how to maneuver safely through life.

"It teaches logic and shows you to survey your surroundings and how to protect yourself from being vulnerable to attack," said the fifth-grader, the daughter of an Air Force reservist, who called the game "exhilarating."

"You never know what the other player is going to do whatever they do I know how to block them," she said. "I have to put a pawn or something non-valuable there, something I don't care about losing."

She said the correlation between the chessboard and the battlefield is obvious to her.

"I think of the king piece as America and I need to protect it so it won't get hurt," Mariah said. "I think about that sometimes when I watch the news."

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